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ABSTRACT

Good news about reading achievement of career-bound students at High Schools That Work (HSTW) sites includes the following: (1) 60% of the 260 sites that tested students in 1993/94 and again in 1996 saw improvement in reading scores; (2) the performance of all students majority and minority improved significantly; (3) HSTW sites widened the gap between their career-bound students and vocational students nationally; and (4) students completing business, marketing and health concentrations had average reading scores that met or exceeded the HSTW reading goal of 279. However, well over half the students at HSTW sites were reading below the performance goal level and a disproportionately large number of career-bound males continue to enroll in basic and general English classes that do not lead to reading improvements. In order for English departments and teachers to take the lead in advancing the reading, writing and communication skills of career-bound youth the following recommendations are made: enroll career-bound students in higher- level English courses to improve reading achievement; give students more intellectually challenging assignments that require them to work harder in and out of class; create assignments that require students to collect, evaluate, organize and present information; get students to apply reading, writing and speaking skills to advance learning in other courses; and act on the message in the HSTW data. (Includes 2 figures.) (MO)

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Research Brief
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HIGH SCHOOLS THAT WORK

Research Brief

Number 2 - June 1997

Reading Performance of Career-Bound Students: Good News and Bad News from the 1996 *High Schools That Work* Assessment

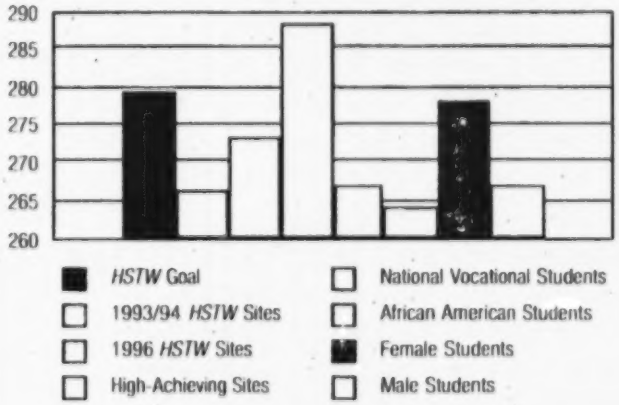
By Gene Bottoms and Betty Creech

The 1996 *High Schools That Work* Assessment contained good news and bad news about the reading achievement of career-bound students at *HSTW* sites. Sites that made a serious commitment to enroll career-bound students in challenging English courses and to require reading and writing skills across the curriculum are experiencing significantly higher reading achievement scores. The good news is apparent four ways:

1. Sixty percent of the 260 *HSTW* sites that tested career-bound students in 1993/94 and again in 1996 saw improvement in reading scores. Career-bound students tested in 1996 are reading significantly better than students tested at the same sites in 1993/94. Scores increased from 266 to 273. The percentage of students meeting the *HSTW* performance goal in reading increased from 33 percent in 1993/94 to 43 percent in 1996. At the most successful *HSTW* sites—with ethnic, racial and socioeconomic backgrounds similar to those of students at all sites—66 percent met the reading goal. (See Figure 1.)
2. The performance of all students (majority and minority) improved significantly. African American students improved by about seven points. Males improved by seven points and females by six points. The average score for females in 1996 (278) was very near the *HSTW* performance goal of 279. (See Figure 1.)
3. *HSTW* sites widened the gap between their career-bound students and vocational students nationally between 1993/94 and 1996. The average reading score for sites that tested in 1993 or 1994 was 266, compared to 267 for vocational students in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) national sample. The 273 average score for *HSTW* sites in 1996 significantly exceeded the national vocational students' score. (See Figure 1.)
4. Students completing business, marketing and health concentrations had an average reading score that met or exceeded the *HSTW* reading goal of 279.

Figure 1

Average achievement on the *High School's That Work* Reading Exam



The bad news is that well over half the students at *HSTW* sites were reading below the performance goal level. Many of these students are male and/or minority students. Many are enrolled in trade, technical and agricultural courses—a group averaging some 15 to 20 points below the goal level. These

Figure 2

Comparison of Reading Performance at All Sites and High-Scoring Sites that Tested in 1993/94 and 1996

	1996 All Sites		1996 High-Scoring Sites		1993/94 All Sites	
	Percent	Score	Percent	Score	Percent	Score
Students Taking the *HSTW*-Recommended English Curriculum	33	281 *	53	293 *	7	289 *
Students Not Taking the *HSTW*-Recommended English Curriculum	67	269	47	283 *	94	265

* These scores met or exceeded the *High Schools That Work* goal of 279.

students—who are unable to process information—will be handicapped in continuing their studies, getting good jobs and advancing in an economy based on continuous learning.

The further bad news is that we continue to enroll disproportionately large numbers of career-bound males in basic and general English classes. Youth in these courses read and write less and are not asked to analyze and synthesize information. As long as high schools continue to sort certain male students according to perceived past performance, these youth will continue to be at a major disadvantage in pursuing further study and progressing in the workplace.

It is time for high school English departments and teachers to recognize that information-processing skills are fundamental to success in an information-centered economy. And it is time to place career-bound youth in an advantaged English curriculum to advance their intellectual and information-processing skills. These students can learn language arts skills, because they are sometimes the highest performing students in mathematics and usually the highest performing in science. Instruction needs to focus on what students need rather than what they did in the past.

English departments and teachers can take the lead in advancing the reading, writing and communication skills of career-bound youth. Embedded in the 1996 *HSTW* Assessment data are ideas for courses of action that teachers can take. High school English departments and teachers can:

- **Enroll career-bound students in higher-level English courses to improve reading achievement.**

Students who take advanced English courses throughout high school are more likely to be taught to college-preparatory standards. As a result, they will be more likely to have assignments that require them to collect, organize, analyze and present information orally and in writing. These skills are critical to success in postsecondary education and the workplace.

The good news is that *HSTW* students who completed an advanced English curriculum had average reading scores that exceeded the *HSTW* goal. The percentage of students completing the *HSTW*-recommended English curriculum improved from seven percent in 1993/94 to 33 percent in 1996. At high-achieving *HSTW* sites, 53 percent of students completed high-level English with an average score of 293. (See Figure 2.)

The bad news is that only one-third of seniors in 1996 reported they had taken college-preparatory English classes throughout high school. Over 60 percent of students were enrolled in basic or general 12th-grade English. Students in basic 12th-grade English scored 25 points below the *HSTW* goal, while students in general 12th-grade English missed the goal by 8 points.

The language arts curriculum appears to be the most tracked curriculum in high school. This is especially true in the case of career-bound students—particularly males—who are being tracked into lower-level English courses. While only one-third of career-bound youth in 1996 were taking a high-level English course, two-thirds of students at all sites and 84 percent of students at high-achieving sites finished a high-level mathematics curriculum. Youth who can finish college preparatory-level algebra and geometry courses have the intellectual capacity to succeed in college-preparatory language arts courses. For many of these youth, the problem is not that they cannot read or do not have the ability to improve their reading skills. The problem is that schools continue to sort students based on past performance. Instead, students and parents should be warned that the information-processing skills gained in college-preparatory English courses are crucial for continued learning in a work or educational setting.

What can English departments and English teachers do?

- Agree on content and performance standards for all English courses and develop the same end-of-course and end-of-unit tests that are given by all teachers to measure performance.
- Do away with practices that track students—particularly male trade,

technical and agricultural students—into lower-level courses;

- Eliminate low-level English courses and concentrate on helping more students master challenging content.
- Develop a college-preparatory curriculum with a balance of reading, writing, speaking and listening activities that are intellectually-demanding.
- Invite middle school teachers to attend "sharing sessions" throughout the year to discuss the performance of ninth-graders in English. Share school assessment data and grading period summaries.
- Work with middle school teachers to align the language arts curriculum. Articulate the expectations for performance in grade 9 and share a copy of the English 9 curriculum with middle school teachers.
- Join with counselors to educate parents to the need for their children to take college preparatory-level English and to support them in doing the kind of work necessary to achieve course standards.

■ Give students more intellectually-challenging assignments that require them to work harder in and out of class.

The good news is that having students complete challenging assignments both in and out of class leads to significantly higher reading scores. In 1996, students who reported doing at least one hour of homework daily had an average reading score of 275 compared to 267 for students who did not have homework or did not do it. Students who read four or more hours a week had average reading scores of 280; students who read fewer hours a week had an average score of 273.

The bad news is that the percentage of students who said they had no homework—or usually did not do homework—did not change between 1993/94 and 1996. Thirty-five percent of career-bound youth are still enrolled in an English curriculum that allows them to graduate without making much effort to read. These students need to be enrolled in English classes that require them to read and write in and out of class.

What can English departments and English teachers do?

- Develop a summer institute for students entering grade 9 who are not ready for college-preparatory English. Provide additional support for them during the school year.
- Offer after-school and before-school tutoring programs utilizing English teachers, peer tutors and volunteers.
- Replace multiple-choice and true-false tests with assessments that require students to construct written responses to open-ended questions.
- Involve students in self-assessment. Teach them to take a critical view of their writing and revise it in peer editing groups.

■ Create assignments that require students to collect, evaluate, organize and present information.

Students were better readers when they:

- Gave oral presentations in English, other academic and vocational classes;
- Completed several short, reflective writing assignments in English, other academic and vocational classes;
- Prepared written research reports several times a year for classes other than English;
- Read assigned books outside of class and had to prove to someone that they had read them.

The bad news is that not enough students are doing the things that result in improved reading ability. Only about half of the students read assigned books outside of class more than twice a year.

Yet, the English departments at some high schools have joined with vocational teachers to require career-bound students to do a major senior project involving:

- A research paper written to standards set by the English teacher;
- A product or service related to the paper;
- An oral presentation before a faculty committee.

These high schools have used the senior project to advance the reading achievement of youth and to tone up the English curriculum in grades 9 through 11. The senior project approach seems to motivate youth to spend many hours writing and rewriting their research papers. There is something motivational about having youth choose a topic within certain boundaries, work with a team of teachers and then go "on stage" to present what they have learned.

What can English departments and English teachers do?

- Make writing assignments weekly.
- Assign projects regularly that give students an opportunity to read, write and make oral presentations.
- Ask students to evaluate a project in terms of what they learned, what they would do differently and how the project could have been improved.

- Use classroom questioning strategies that require students to analyze and synthesize information. Encourage critical analysis of literary works.
- Provide opportunities for students to solve problems in class. After presenting a problem-solving model, suggest a problem from literature (such as a Shakespearean play), a film or the local newspaper.

■ Get students to apply reading, writing and speaking skills to advance learning in other courses.

Reading performance was higher for students who said they used reading to complete vocational assignments daily or weekly, used a computer to complete vocational assignments daily or weekly, made frequent presentations in vocational classes and used writing skills often in vocational classes. It appears that students' ability to read, synthesize, comprehend and organize information is enhanced if vocational assignments require them to read, write and share aloud what they have learned. Such assignments advance students' communication skills and their achievement in a vocational field.

The bad news is that more than half of career-bound students are enrolled in vocational classes in which they seldom have to read, write or make oral presentations. Youth in these classes are being prepared for dead-end jobs, because they lack the communication skills to pass an exam to enter the field of study they prefer. Employers with high-paying job openings are not going to hire youth who lack reading, writing and speaking skills. Such skills are crucial for learning new tasks and communicating with customers and co-workers.

English teachers must take the lead in working with vocational and other teachers to implement reading, writing and speaking-for-learning instructional strategies that all teachers can use.

What can English departments and English teachers do?

- Integrate the college-preparatory curriculum with technical writing and reading assignments.
- Work with other teachers, including vocational teachers, to help them plan classroom experiences that require students to use reading, writing and speaking skills.
- Share with the total faculty the emphasis being placed on reading, writing, speaking and listening in the college-preparatory English curriculum. Ask the entire school to emphasize one or more language arts areas for the school year. (Writing across the curriculum is an example of such a focus.)
- Work with the librarian to develop a reading list for each grade. The librarian (and other resource teachers) can provide options for students who are reading below grade level. An effort should be made to help students read more challenging materials as the year progresses.

■ Act on the message in the *HSTW* data.

While the 1996 *HSTW* Assessment report contains many signs of progress in students' reading achievement, it is clear that:

- Lower-level English courses are not working. They accommodate students to past performance instead of raising them to a higher performance level.
- Too many students are still trapped in a curriculum system that sorts and accommodates rather than challenges them to learn more complex material.
- Too few students—predominantly those in trade, technical and agricultural concentrations—have class experiences that require them to apply academic skills in authentic problem-solving situations across the curriculum.

Unless school and teacher leaders take the time to examine beliefs and practices, the self-fulfilling prophecy of low achievement will likely continue unabated.

Summary

Communication skills are essential for further study, for advancing in an information-centered economy and for functioning as citizens in a democracy. Career-bound students are weakest in the ability to read, comprehend and synthesize information and the ability to construct written and oral responses to information. English teachers need to take the lead with other teachers in reaching a consensus that all teachers are responsible for advancing students' language arts skills. This means developing high schools where students become active consumers of learning by using reading and writing skills in every classroom.

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